

ROADTESTED

Removing Roadblocks
to Learning and Leading



Snowstorms and Studying Breakthroughs

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I work in a small, rural high school in Mississippi. After years of drilling state-tested skills, I wanted my students to focus on grasping the purpose and significance of what they read. However, students were daunted by my short-answer, “thinking-required” tests, and especially unhappy that I made tests rare and cumulative to encourage long-term retention.

Well into the fall of their senior year, I noticed an alarming number of students approaching the home stretch of their K–12 careers with failing grades in my British literature classes—nearly a quarter of them! They didn’t respond to any of my attempts to help; several left every test completely blank. They wanted a spoon-fed curriculum and I wanted to teach without sacrificing rigor. We were at an impasse.

It was a very rare Mississippi snowstorm that created the impetus for a breakthrough. I had a test scheduled for that Thursday. When the tiny snow flurries resulted in cancelled classes on Tuesday (and then Wednesday), I turned to YouTube to make sure my kids were prepared. Even in rural Mississippi, virtually everyone has access to the Internet.

I sat on my porch with a digital camera propped over my shoulder and filmed a first-person view as I flipped through the textbook. I had already placed little round stickers next to key lines as we discussed poems from the Romantic era in class, so I pointed those out as



I talked through a review. I also made a summary list of historical events, poems, and figures from the era and demonstrated how to create an acronym to remember titles in a logical sequence (so, for example, all of the poems by Percy Bysshe Shelley were grouped together).

At the end of the review, I talked through the unit themes and demonstrated how students could categorize poems by thinking about the meaning of key lines; Robert Burns’s “To A Mouse” could fit broadly into a category of poems about memory and time, but it’s also about humanity’s relationship with nature. I hoped this practice of creating flexible categories would help students prepare for holistic comprehension questions for which they couldn’t memorize answers.

I posted the seven-minute video online and spread the word to students via e-mail, Remind, Twitter, and our Facebook group. When school started back, students immediately came to me asking if I would make another video for the next test. At first, I couldn’t understand what was so helpful; it was just a condensed version of the same things I’d said in class. But finally it clicked—it wasn’t hearing me talk all over again that had helped; it was *seeing* me

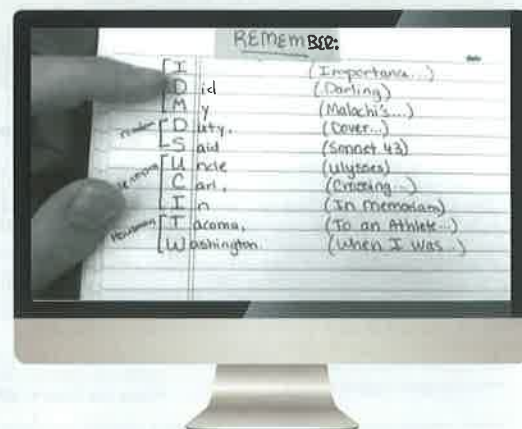
demonstrate how I “study.” My students didn’t need help with literature; they needed help with how to learn.

So I proposed an experiment: they would use “dots” to keep track of key lines and would watch new review videos, and we’d see if it helped. Throughout the unit, I was careful to model basic study skills, such as making it obvious when I placed a marker in my book. I constantly reminded them of the importance of our “experiment.”

The results were astounding. Averages from the previous test to the post-experiment test improved by two letter grades. Instead of 15 students receiving an F, only four did. The lowest of those still earned a 50—a far cry from the blank test days. High achievers benefitted too—the percentage of students receiving an A jumped from 6 percent of the class to 33 percent. In short, it was a game changer.

This year, I have been able to pointedly model study methods and organization strategies from the beginning. Much to the relief of the class, we’ve reached a happy medium where I can maintain the same rigor while still empowering my students to succeed. Good thing it snowed! ■

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